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For Sam Beam, the impressively bearded man behind Iron & Wine, the transition from the spare, intimate folk that made his name in alternative-music circles to playful, lushly fleshed-out songs with an African flair was not something that gave him pause.

“It would just be kind of lame to do the same record over and over again, don't you think?” he said in a phone interview last week. “I can get bored real fast, to be honest.”

His 2005 EP with Calexico, *In the Reins*, led naturally to last year's *The Shepherd's Dog*, which is rich with percussion, world-music rhythms and instrumental touches, experimental

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production flourishes, and Beam's signature vocal whisper.

"It wasn't like a five-point paper or anything," he said of the shift. "Going into it, I knew we were going to try a lot of new things. ...

"Working with the Calexico boys taught me a lot about collaborating with people, leaving space for stuff to happen," he said. "By the time it comes to recording it, all the parts are kind of there. Not because I don't like playing with people. [But] that's what I do during the day and that's what I like to do - come up with arrangements. This time I definitely left space open for people to come and make their mark. ... It was nice to be surprised, and then react to what they did."

Iron & Wine, performing as an eight-piece band, will play Iowa City's Englert Theatre on Thursday, June 12. (The show has been moved from its original venue, Davenport's Capitol Theatre.)



Beam was a film professor in Miami before Sub Pop pursued him based on demos that had been circulating. On the decision to go after a music career, he said, "It's a lot cheaper than making movies."

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His songwriting style, he said, was influenced by his background in film. "I was definitely drawn to the visual style of communication," he said. "I just like to suggest and describe more than I like to explain."

The Creek Drank the Cradle (2002) and *The Sea & the Rhythm* (2003) established Iron & Wine's homemade, minimalistic aesthetic, worlds away from

The Shepherd

s Dog

. As somebody who found Beam's hushed, barely adorned folk tunes too monochromatic for my tastes,

The Shepherd

s Dog

feels revelatory.

There is certainly a craft to Iron & Wine's early recordings, but they seem closed if you're on a different wavelength from Beam's storytelling. His newest record is warm and welcoming, with plenty of entry points.

"White Tooth Man," with a chorus of electric guitars and Indian undertones, finds a delicious balance between sweetness and urgency. "House by the Sea" initially sounds patched together from a handful of different sources and genres, with backward effects, dreamy keyboards, and a harmonica finally giving way to a happy jungle din with Beam's voice hovering above it.

The vocals on "Carousel" struggle to break through the warbly effect laid over them, and Beam said the goal was to create "this feeling of being underwater" to match the musical setting. Although it's one of the more simple musical treatments on *The Shepherd*

s Dog

, it also might be the riskiest, as the tone and texture go a long way toward obscuring the lyrics.

"I put a lot of work into the words, and so I hope people can understand them,"

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Beam said. Still, "I thought this record was a lot more about the sound of the thing more so than just the words."



But Beam said he doesn't think the arrangements draw attention away from his vocals or lyrics: "I never thought of it as necessarily distracting, because I never had a picture of what it should have been before."

Beam has a dry humor, and a refreshing detachment from his material. He doesn't seem to treat them like precious jewels that can't be touched. On the road, Iron & Wine tries to give songs new life - that whole boredom thing again.

That was hard with his earlier material, Beam said. "You have more of a space to add things on, but at the same time, I spent so long boiling those songs down ... to the essential elements."

The wit comes through again when I ask whether he feels he's betraying those older songs, the ones he labored to pare down.

"I never felt like I really promised them anything," Beam said. "They're just

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songs. Hopefully, if it's a strong enough song, it'll hold up to different versions. It might communicate something different, but hopefully it'll hold up."

Iron & Wine will perform on June 12 at the Englert Theatre in Iowa City. The show starts at 8 p.m., and tickets are \$26.